



# Department of Justice

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## **THREE COLOMBIAN NATIONALS ARRESTED, CHARGED IN ALIEN SMUGGLING AND VISA FRAUD SCHEME**

WASHINGTON – Three Colombian nationals have been arrested in Colombia on charges of conspiracy to commit alien smuggling for profit, alien smuggling for profit, and conspiracy to commit visa fraud in connection with their alleged roles in an extensive and sophisticated visa fraud scheme against the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá, Colombia. The arrests were announced today by Assistant Attorney General Lanny A. Breuer of the Criminal Division; Acting U.S. Attorney Channing D. Phillips of the District of Columbia; Eric J. Boswell, Assistant Secretary for Diplomatic Security and Director of the Office of Foreign Missions, U.S. State Department; and Assistant Secretary John T. Morton of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Heliber Toro Mejia, 50, Humberto Toro Mejia, 58, and Luz Elena Acuna Rios, 51, all of Bogotá, are charged in a three-count indictment returned by a federal grand jury in the District of Columbia on Feb. 4, 2009, and unsealed today. All three defendants were arrested on June 2, 2009, by Colombian authorities in Bogotá on provisional arrest warrants in response to a U.S. government request for their arrest.

According to the indictment, the defendants were the leaders of an extensive and sophisticated visa fraud ring that profited by assisting otherwise inadmissible Colombian nationals in fraudulently procuring U.S. visas from the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá. To support the visa applications of alien applicants, the defendants and other conspirators allegedly created fictitious backgrounds for the aliens and created fraudulent supporting documentation, including paperwork that appeared to be official Colombian government-issued documents such as tax filings and birth and marriage certificates. The indictment alleges that the conspirators coached the aliens on how to pass the U.S. visa interview at the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá by answering questions untruthfully. During the course of this conspiracy, which according to the indictment lasted between July 15, 2005, and March 20, 2007, more than 100 aliens are alleged to have fraudulently obtained or attempted to fraudulently obtain a U.S. visa. According to the indictment, many of those aliens who did obtain a fraudulently-procured visa used that visa to enter the United States.

If convicted, each defendant faces a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison for conspiracy to commit alien smuggling for profit, 10 years in prison for alien smuggling for

profit, and five years in prison for conspiracy to commit visa fraud. Each defendant is also subject to a maximum fine of \$250,000 for each charge.

The arrests and charges are the result of “Operation Coffee Country,” a coordinated international investigation by the Diplomatic Security Service - Regional Security Office in Bogotá and the ICE Attaché’s Office in Bogotá. The Diplomatic Security Service - Criminal Investigations Division and the ICE Special Agent in Charge, Washington, D.C. provided substantial assistance. The Colombian Department of Administrative Security (DAS) and Colombian prosecutors also provided substantial support.

The case is being prosecuted by Trial Attorney James S. Yoon of the Criminal Division’s Domestic Security Section and Assistant U.S. Attorney Frederick W. Yette of the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the District of Columbia. Former Assistant U.S. Attorney Jeanne M. Hauch of the District of Columbia and Trial Attorney Christine Duey of the Domestic Security Section provided substantial assistance. Thomas Black and Nicolette Romano of the Criminal Division’s Office of International Affairs along with Peter Vincent and Robert Emery of the Office of Judicial Attaché at the U.S. Embassy in Colombia provided invaluable support.

An indictment is merely a formal accusation. It is not proof of guilt, and a defendant is presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty.

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